

Sihanouk, Norodom
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with the CIA
CIA 4 Cambodia

A prince obsessed

NORODOM SIHANOUK with
WILFRED BURCHETT:

My War with the CIA
Cambodia's Fight for Survival

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When Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia was overthrown by a coup d'état three years ago his country was at peace and very largely under the control of its government. This had been achieved by a degree of compromise with the Communist side in the Vietnamese War, a compromise eventually intolerable to the United States and South Vietnam, who used the new circumstances in Cambodia to invade and clear suspected Communist base areas and sanctuaries and to cut Communist lines of supply.

Whether or not this was a decisive step on the way to a ceasefire in Vietnam, as is claimed, Cambodia itself became another theatre of the war and has suffered atrociously in consequence. Its government does not govern, for the countryside is largely in the hands of the Communists—North Vietnamese, Sihanouk's Cambodian partisans, South Vietnamese, or whatever. Corruption is no less. Even with peace in Vietnam, a solution in Cambodia seems hardly possible except by compromise with the Prince in Peking. There is thus a sense in which Sihanouk's fight for survival is also that of Cambodia.

Whether there was any war against Sihanouk by the American Central

Intelligence Agency is not proved by this short, self-justifying account of his political life, though the evidence is widely accepted. The book's exuberance seems less immoderate than that of the Prince's views of Indochina as given to Jean Lacouture (*L'Indochine, vue de Pékin*, reviewed in the *TLS* on February 11, 1972)—or is it merely that propaganda sounds more propagandist in French? Had there been less turmoil in Cambodia's relations with Thailand and South Vietnam, turmoil which Sihanouk did little to remove, plots against him would have been less easy to concoct; nor, given what he now admits about his assistance to the Communist side in Vietnam, can he claim that the Americans had no reason to concoct them. For the Vietminh and Vietcong, he says, "the main thing was my unswerving political, diplomatic and material support"; "For years we had officially winked at their presence"; "It was Lon Nol himself who signed many of the agreements with the NLF (Vietcong)". So there were written agreements, too, at a time when any connexion or connivance was officially and repeatedly denied, and when the "neutrality" of Cambodia was vaunted and proclaimed by Sihanouk's ambassadors abroad. The exiled prince is engagingly frank, as he is elsewhere in admitting the large Vietnamese component in his freedom forces—Cambodian Vietnamese, but how does one tell?

Other points of interest emerge from the diatribe. Sihanouk received news of his overthrow in Moscow,

where he had asked for and been promised military aid to modernize armed forces which had lacked new equipment and weapons ever since he had terminated American military aid in 1963. Russia duly fulfilled the promise—but to General Lon Nol, who had ousted Sihanouk (and thereby gained significant political strength in the new Cambodia). For this and because it has failed to recognize his government in exile, Russia receives its share of abuse. Sihanouk's indignation is understandable. Chinese support would be unlikely to restore him rapidly to the leadership of a Russian client state.

Sihanouk's hatred of the Americans is horrible to behold: the most trivial anecdote in which he can claim to have scored off them appears at tedious length. His sensitivity, his eagerness to be insulted and to triumph over the offender, however innocent, is beyond measure. It is this that casts some doubt on the detail he gives of the plots against him, the outlines of which, including that of his final overthrow, are, however, well enough known. Of course people tried to overthrow him: few who read his boastful, bitter, obsessive, ranting book will wonder why. But the whole truth is not here. This god-king, turned democrat, turned demagogue, turned resistance fighter, always patriot, presided over the life of his country for twenty-eight difficult but peaceful years. Only disaster has followed his departure. In the Cambodian dimension he has validity still.